

THE GOOD, THE BAD AND THE FBI; Trojans athletic director Swann answers questions about men's basketball program

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Body

LOS ANGELES >> The uncertainty among USC's revenue sports has mostly been reserved for men's basketball.

Associate head coach **Tony Bland** was arrested in September as part of an FBI investigation into bribery and corruption throughout college basketball, four days before the Trojans began practices for the season. **Bland**, first put on administrative leave, was fired last month. The probe also cost the team sophomore guard De'Anthony Melton, who was ultimately suspended for the season by the university after it determined a family friend had received impermissible benefits.

On the court, the Trojans have had trouble despite their first preseason top-10 ranking in four decades and expectations of a deeper run in the NCAA Tournament. A pair of three-game losing streaks have instead put them on the edge of the tournament bubble. A home sweep of the Oregon schools last week was dampered by the news that forward Bennie Boatwright would miss the rest of the season with a knee injury.

In the first of a two-part interview, USC athletic director **Lynn Swann**, 65, recently spoke with the Southern California News Group about the up-and-down season and the FBI investigation, plus other topics. The interview has been edited for brevity. The second, in which **Swann** discusses football coach Clay Helton, the football program and expectations, will appear in Wednesday's editions.

Q: On basketball, what's your feeling on how the season has gone?

A: Certainly this team has had some distractions from the beginning of the season, but I think Andy (Enfield) has done a good job of bringing them back and getting them to play good basketball. Seemingly, you look at a last-second shot against Stanford, just pure luck. (Arizona State loss), tough, having a lead, not closing. Here's a basketball team that, in the NCAA playoffs, did close really well. They were behind a lot of the teams and stormed back and even the game they lost (to Baylor in round of 32), they were storming back and it looked like they would have a chance to make it. I think Andy probably looks at this team: 'We got to figure out how we become that team again, how we become in the fourth-quarter a team that is surging forward, not just holding on.'

Q: What to you would be a successful finish?

A: Andy's consideration is that a successful finish for these guys would be making it back into the NCAA Tournament.

Q: Would you like to see them go further?

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A: Everybody would like to see them go further. I'd like to see them finish and not have to necessarily play into the Tournament.

Q: The season began with the FBI investigation. They announced that in September. You guys hired the Freeh Group at that time. Can you explain what they've done and, in general, what has been the USC response in the months since?

A: We did the things that we felt were important to do and necessary to do under those circumstances. No. 1, the Freeh Group came in to look at us internally to see what was going on. Our concern is that this happened at all. Our second concern was how deep did it run? Was it institutional neglect? And we found that not to be the case. All the things we have in place, all the things we attempt to do, all the onboarding we do with coaches and staff coming in to understand compliance and rules were all intact. All those things were done. What you had, at the end of the day, was someone who was operating outside those boundaries. So, you can do all the important things, smart things and the right things. The one thing you can never totally stop is one individual saying, 'This is what I've decided to do,' regardless of their understanding of what the rules are.

Q: So the Freeh Group found that it was basically a one-off?

A: Yes.

Q: When did they complete the investigation?

A: They made a report to the president's office. This was a while ago.

Q: De'Anthony Melton has had to sit out the season as a result. In January, it was found, according to his attorney, a family friend received a plane ticket to Las Vegas and may have received a hotel room. The punishment was determined that De'Anthony will sit out the year. Why did you feel that was the appropriate punishment for him? Can you explain the decision?

A: I won't go into details, but our first priority here is to protect the program and to also protect the players in that program. Our process was, during our investigation, to look at every detail, look at the facts, make a determination, constant communication with the NCAA in terms of rules violations and interpretations. We came to a conclusion, based on the actions of the family friend, that De'Anthony would be considered non-compliant. If he had played in these games, these games would potentially have been forfeited. We felt the best thing to do, while still advocating and trying to find a way if the facts would support it, that he could play, while certainly making sure the team was compliant and could move forward. At the end of the day, we had to make that decision.

Q: Was that investigation into his matter separate from the Freeh Group?

A: The Freeh Group was looking at a variety of things.

Q: But was it separate?

A: It was all mixed in together.

Q: Was De'Anthony close to playing this season?

A: Every week seemed to be a little bit more information that we would look at and investigate and follow through with. So, it was never the kind of investigation that said at the beginning he was out and he was never coming back. It was always, here's the situation, here's more information we found today, follow up, follow up. We were constantly in a position to protect the program and to advocate for De'Anthony at the same time.

Q: Did you talk with players on the team? When they found out De'Anthony wasn't going to play, there was some disappointment.

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A: I think that's the coach's job, and Andy's job is to keep their focus and to keep them moving forward. I think he did that well enough.

Q: Do you have to prepare a report to the NCAA from your findings of the De'Anthony investigation?

A: Much of what we did, in terms of finding out information, we talked to the NCAA to get an interpretation for how we would move forward. But the NCAA has yet to do their own investigation. They've been asked to stand down until the FBI finishes theirs.

Q: Has this FBI investigation been the biggest challenge you've faced as athletic director?

A: That hasn't been a big challenge because we're not investigating. The FBI is doing the investigation. It certainly has been a distraction, and I don't doubt it's been extraordinary difficult for all those parties in more ways than just the obvious ways.

Q: Were you overall pleased with Andy and the staff's compliance level?

A: When you look at how the NCAA evaluates teams and compliance and everything else, the NCAA has determined we were doing everything the right way. In many cases, coaches had gone through compliance training, and they said coaches were doing an outstanding job, but it's like I said, any time you have one person that decides, even when they know it's the wrong thing to do, they decide to make that move, there's almost nothing you can do to stop them from making that move. But the best thing you can do is to have documentation, be compliant and show that institutionally it's not something that you support, it's not something you allowed to happen because of negligence and being proactive.

Q: Are there any reforms you would like to see come out of the Pac-12 task force for college basketball?

A: There are a lot of folks who believe college basketball needs to change, but part of that is a ripple effect of a one-and-done rule in the NBA. Part of that is also, if all the information is correct in the FBI investigation, some schools or players or families being incentivized by outside companies and individuals. How do you stop that? It's the proliferation of all these amateur sports clubs and teams that seem to have an impact on potential student-athletes and where they go to school and the people involved with them at that level. If there's a way to clean that up, if there's a way to create a better system moving forward, I'd be very much in favor of that. What that is? We'll look to see. I don't know if it's going to come out of the Pac-12, or the NCAA and their committee.

Q: When Pat Haden was AD, he talked about the challenge in winning in college baseball for a program like USC. You get equivalency scholarships and USC tuition is different than say UCLA tuition and that makes it harder for USC to recreate what it did in the '70s. What do you expect year in and year out? They missed the NCAA Tournament the past two years.

A: When you're not making it to the World Series, when you're not moving ahead, you have to try to get back, retool, find different ways to coach and compete and get there. That's what the coach is going to have to do. Players are going to have to do better to be more competitive and work at it. Yeah, we have a little difficulty being a private school and equivalency scholarships and the whole deal, trying to balance out the things of Title IX. So, yes, one of the major ripples of Title IX has been to weaken, shall we say, the structure and being able to get the best potential baseball players like we used to do in the past, but we can't hold that out as an excuse. We just have to find a way to move forward.

Q: You see it as a real factor?

A: It's a real factor. You can't continue to say, 'OK, that's our excuse. We don't have to be that good.' The idea is you come here, you compete, you're going to be that good. You build a program, you find a way within the contents of the rules and the scholarships and the finances to build a better team.

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Q: One of the ongoing issues in the Pac-12, compared to other conferences nowadays, is the TV deal. The payout SEC teams get is a lot more than the Pac-12 teams get. The Big Ten gets more. Are you concerned at the varying pay discrepancies from what schools from different conferences get from their TV deals?

A: We understand the differences. We understand that our television structure and deal financially doesn't pay off as much as the others, and we're in this contract until 2024. Look, the Pac-12 took a gamble, took a risk, creating its own network and we're in it. It's silly to rail against it or to throw people under that bus. The people that made the decision at that time felt like it was the right thing to do. Hasn't worked out as well. All right. Let's move on and continue to do the best we can. But it's not something that's going to get fixed in the next two years.

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